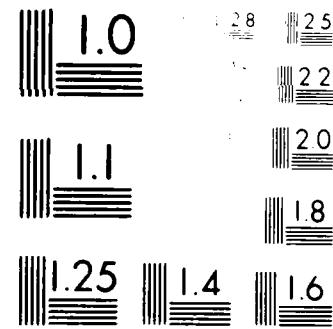


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THE OTHER TERRORIST WAR:
PALESTINIAN VERSUS PALESTINIAN

Bruce Hoffman

January 1986

P-7175

The Other Terrorist War: Palestinian versus Palestinian*

Bruce Hoffman

Once again, Americans traveling abroad have been swept into the maelstrom of Middle East conflicts and the internal power struggles of local terrorist groups. More disconcerting is that the brutal assaults at the Rome and Vienna airports--like the hijackings of a TWA aircraft in June, an Italian cruise ship in October and an Egypt Air plane in November--again demonstrate anew how terrorists unscrupulously use the lives of Americans and other foreign nationals to advance their own parochial goals.

Indeed, the latest incidents, in which five Americans were among the 19 killed, were carried out less to harm Israel (the ostensible target of the terrorists) than to discredit Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat.

Responsibility for the two attacks has been laid to the renegade PLO splinter group led by Abu Nidal. In a vocation where secrecy and anonymity are often second nature, Nidal stands out as a premier practitioner of his craft. He is a man who has returned from the grave to haunt us--and Arafat.

In November 1984, reports from Baghdad--confirmed by family members--were that the chronically-ill Nidal had died of heart disease. Then, in January 1985, Nidal mysteriously reappeared, claiming that the report of his death had been part of a plot by the Iraqi and Jordanian secret services, in concert with Arafat, to eliminate him. More ominous, however, was his warning that "in the course of this year we are going to mount operations against the Americans and the billions of dollars that their forces have will be insufficient to protect them." The threat to attack Americans was doubtlessly calculated to thwart Arafat's continuing efforts to obtain United States recognition of the PLO.

*This article originally appeared as "A blood feud with global repercussions," in the Sunday "Comment" section of the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* on 5 January 1986.

Nidal and Arafat were not always enemies. In fact, both men share remarkably similar backgrounds and at one time were close associates. Both Arafat and Nidal were born in what was then British-ruled Palestine in the 1930s, and both of their well-to-do families were uprooted during the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, fleeing to refugee camps on the Gaza Strip.

Like many other refugees who, in the 1950s, gravitated to the Arabian Gulf in search of work, Nidal became intoxicated by the rhetoric of a new generation of Palestinian leaders preaching guerrilla war and the recovery of their homeland. At the forefront of these activities was Arafat, who, like Nidal was an engineer by profession.

Soon after Arafat founded *Fatah*, Nidal joined the group. As one of its original members and a long-standing Arafat-loyalist, Nidal was able to ascend to a senior position within the organization. Moreover, after Arafat was appointed PLO chairman in 1969, Nidal benefited further from their friendship, becoming the head of the umbrella organization's operations in Iraq.

In 1974, however, Nidal broke with his mentor. After addressing the United Nations that year, Arafat had concluded that Palestinian goals could best be achieved through diplomacy. Accordingly, he banned terrorist operations outside of Israel and the occupied territories. Nidal viewed this reversal of policy as a "defeatist strategy." Not only did he refuse to accede to the prohibition but, accusing Arafat of forsaking the armed struggle, Nidal left the PLO and launched an independent terrorist campaign centered in Europe.

After warnings to stop the irresponsible operations went unheeded, Arafat ordered Nidal's execution. Nidal reciprocated by dispatching a "hit-team" to Damascus to assassinate Arafat and declaring war on all PLO moderates and Arafat supporters. Condemned to death, Nidal declared, were "all those who wish to negotiate with the Zionist enemy, whether Arabs or Palestinians."

This was the beginning of a vicious internecine feud that has raged for more than a decade. Targets have included not only Arafat loyalists and Palestinians favoring accommodation with Israel, but diplomats from moderate Arab states such as Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Thus,

although the ostensible target of Nidal's terrorist campaign remains Israel, he has been just as preoccupied with killing his Palestinian and Arab brethren. In fact, of the 60 or so operations masterminded by Nidal since 1974, at least half have been directed against Palestinian or Arab targets.

The latest victims in this fratricidal war, however, were the innocent travelers killed and injured in Rome and Vienna. The locations of the attacks probably were chosen by Nidal himself to humiliate Arafat further. For more than a decade, Italy and the PLO have maintained close ties, enjoying a cordial relationship that began to sour only after Palestinian terrorists seized an Italian luxury liner last October. Austria was in fact the first country in West Europe to formally recognize the PLO, establishing diplomatic relations in 1979. Accordingly, the terrorist operations in Rome and Vienna were calculated not only to hit Israel, but to cause strains in the relationships between Arafat and the governments of Italy and Austria. In Italy's case, they were designed to wreck an already damaged arrangement.

Just two months ago, Arafat--as a result of the embarrassment caused by the *Achille Lauro* hijacking--once again issued a ban on Palestinian terrorist operations outside of Israel and the occupied territories. Nidal's response was identical to his actions more than a decade earlier when Arafat first tried to impose a similar edict: outright defiance and bloodshed.

But this objective is probably only part of a "grander" strategy formulated by Nidal in hopes of derailing any progress towards a comprehensive peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute. In recent months, Arafat has maneuvered to trade recognition of Israel for the establishment of a Palestinian state (confederated with Jordan) on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Such a settlement is, of course, completely anathema to Nidal, who has repeatedly demonstrated his determination to sabotage any negotiated settlement of the Palestinian question.

Nidal is not alone in this quest. The wider, regional ambitions of radical states such as Libya, Syria and Iran dovetail well with Nidal's strategy and goals. In this respect, he benefits from the bases, arms, money and logistical support supplied by these countries. Nidal has

also profited from Arafat's failure to reverse the decline of the PLO's fortunes since its expulsion from Lebanon in 1982, which has created new sources of discontent within the Palestinian movement itself.

Scattered throughout the Middle East or languishing in Lebanon, a new generation of Palestinian terrorists is coming of age, one that has lost faith in diplomacy, rejects compromise and embraces armed struggle as the only solution to its plight. The lone survivor of the Rome assault is probably typical of the new recruits attracted to Nidal's uncompromising extremism. A 19 year-old from a third generation exiled family, he grew up surrounded by the squalor of refugee camps and the violence engulfing Lebanon. His own home was in the Shatila district of Beirut--the scene of a massacre carried out by Israeli-backed Christian militiamen in 1982. That incident, he explained, justified the terrorist attack on the airport.

By unleashing his own terrorist campaign--directed at foreign nationals and waged outside of the Middle East--Nidal seeks to demonstrate that Chairman Arafat is neither the sole representative voice of the Palestinian people nor the undisputed head of their liberation movement. Nidal seeks to demonstrate that not only is Arafat unable to manage his troops but also that he is nothing more than a figurehead--a general without an army, a leader without a following.

If Nidal can achieve his objectives, then any impetus for the United States, Israel or any other state to negotiate with Arafat is removed,] since it would be pointless to deal with a powerless leader.



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